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Paradise Regained

**TV, Movie Studios Rediscover
Hawaii's Charms, Including
Beauty and Financial Breaks**

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When Tom Selleck drove his "Magnum, P.I." Ferrari into the Hawaiian sunset in 1988, the state's television industry pretty much left with him. Aside from one season of the syndicated "Baywatch," television studios largely shunned the islands in favor of faux-tropical locales around Southern California. What's more, TV tastes were shifting toward police dramas set on gritty urban streets and away from "blue skies" programming.


But the Aloha State, hurt by a severe dip in tourism in recent years, is aggressively -- and successfully, judging by the new fall season -- trying to make a big return to the small screen. Thanks to new tax incentives, a swing back toward escapist programming and the increasing importance of cinematography in network television, four new prime-time series will shoot exclusively in Hawaii.

Next week, **News Corp.**'s Fox launches "North Shore," a soap set at a fictional Oahu resort populated by billionaire guests and a young, amorously active staff. The fall season includes "Hawaii," a series from **General Electric Co.**'s NBC about laid-back local cops battling drug cartels and other island crime; and "Lost," from **Walt Disney Co.**'s ABC, which tells the story of strangers whose plane crashes on a remote island. **Time Warner Inc.**'s WB network will soon start production on "Rocky Point," a coming-of-age story about an East Coast transplant and her boyfriend, a professional surfer.

Financial perks are primarily behind the shift. Faced with double-digit drops in tourism revenue after the 9/11 terror attacks, lawmakers two years ago took a cue from states such as New Mexico and Louisiana and installed a series of tax breaks for the movie and television industries. The centerpiece is a 4% rebate for anything productions spend on filming in the state, ranging from payroll to hotel taxes -- a healthy savings when TV dramas can cost as much as \$2 million an episode to produce.

"We were looking at Australia or New Zealand," says "Lost" Executive Producer Damon Lindelof, "but Hawaii won because

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Photo: ABC

Hawaii's varied backdrops are evident in ABC's 'Lost,' about plane-crash survivors.

among lawmakers to throw even more money at the television industry, a contentious topic within the state. Some businesspeople think Hollywood is already coddled enough. Even so, Gov. Linda Lingle backed a bill in the most recent legislative session to lift rebates as high as 15% next year. That particular measure failed.

Changing tastes in TV are also playing a key role in the move west. The success of the NBC series "Las Vegas" has shown producers that there is an appetite for shows set in unique locations, while Fox's hit prime-time soap "The O.C." has rival networks looking to copy its waves-and-babes setting. Overall, there is a rising trend toward travelog television, Hollywood veterans note, with reality shows such as "Survivor" and "Amazing Race" providing the blueprint. And baby boomers, who watch more network TV as they age, are only too happy to engage in fantasies of a surfside retirement.

The networks need to stanch the flow of viewers to cable, notes Todd Leavitt, president of the Emmy-awarding Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, and are making use of their higher production budgets to do so, trying to wow audiences with rich cinematography. And nothing looks quite as good in the living room as a tropical Eden. "There's also the factor that nobody under the age of 24 really remembers a television series set in Hawaii," Mr. Leavitt says. "Suddenly it's novel again."

the financial incentives made it as cheap as filming in L.A."

The money TV and movie crews leave behind -- the Hawaii Film Office estimates production costs in the state will top \$100 million this year -- isn't what lawmakers are really after. With tourism as the state's No. 1 industry, the goal is "to send out a gorgeous electronic postcard" every week, says Linda Wheeler, a marketing executive at the Chamber of Commerce of Hawaii.

And for the producers who want the rebate, there is a catch: To make sure the state's tourism coffers reap the full benefit, shows must not use the state as a stand-in for another place. (When "ER" sent Dr. Carter to Africa last season, the episodes were filmed in Hawaii; the show didn't receive the rebate. "Lost" never says it isn't in Hawaii so it made the cut.)

As the tax incentives start to show success, there is a strong movement



Photo: FOX

Fox's 'North Shore' features guests at a fictional resort.

Television production first came to Hawaii in 1959 with an ABC series called "Adventures in Paradise," but most shows with tropical themes continued to film in Los Angeles. (The producers of "Gilligan's Island" filmed the 1964 pilot in Hawaii, but quickly retreated to a Hollywood soundstage.) With the popularization of surf culture in the late 1960s, the tide turned: CBS invested heavily in a production facility in 1968 for its hit cop drama "Hawaii Five-O" and, when the series was canceled twelve years later, created "Magnum" specifically to keep the production facility running.



Photo: NBC

Photo of the cast of NBC's 'Hawaii,' a cop show.

But dramatic programming in the 1990s began to be dominated by dark series such as "Hill Street Blues" and "Law & Order"; and with Canada installing 35% to 50% tax breaks for production companies in 1994, Hawaii fell into a steep slump. "We just weren't in the zeitgeist," says Donne Dawson, director of the Hawaii Film Office.

Producers contend audiences are ready for palm trees and coconuts again. A big function of the comedic crime drama "Hawaii" is providing escape in a time of terror alerts and scandals in Iraq, says Chris Conti, senior vice president for drama development at NBC. "People watch TV for some kind of release before they go to bed," he says.

Not that it is always an escape to paradise for the production companies. Chris Brancato, executive producer of "North Shore," says he had to reshoot the entire pilot after rainstorms ruined the shoot. There are also labor problems. Part of the financial incentive to film in Hawaii is that most of the "below-the-line" staff is hired locally; and with four series filming full time on top of a full movie roster -- GE's Universal Pictures is in preproduction for a big-screen version of "Magnum, P.I." -- there's a shortage of qualified crew members.

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